

“Over There” – Nora Bayes (1917)

Added to the National Registry: 2005

Essay by Cary O'Dell



“Over There” sheet music featuring Nora Bayes



Original release label



George Cohan

A song forever intertwined with American patriotism and World War I especially, Nora Bayes’ “Over There” was named to the National Recording Registry in 2005.

“Over There” was the work of prolific Broadway tunesmith George Cohan who supposedly wrote the tune while on a train, inspired by a rash of war-related headlines on the newspapers around him. It would prove to be Cohan’s only song ever written not specifically for a stage musical. It would also prove to be the final piece of Cohan’s patriotic, if unofficial, musical triptych, positioned after “Yankee Doodle Dandy” (written in 1904) and “You’re a Grand Ole Flag” (written in 1906).

Though some sources state that Broadway singer Charles King was the first to perform the song publicly, other articles of the time suggest that indeed it was Nora Bayes who debut it, perhaps as early as one day after it was written. What is known for sure is that Bayes recorded it quite early—for the Victor Label on July 13, 1917. And though others would also go on to record the tune, including Billy Murray (who had a massive hit with Cohan’s “Grand Ole Flag”) and Enrico Caruso, it is Bayes’s rendition that became the standard, and the success story.

Bayes (born Eleanora Goldberg on October 3, 1880) was a major star of early 20th century recording, Broadway and vaudeville. Born in Illinois (though some sources state California), Bayes began her singing career in the Windy City before hitting the vaudeville circuit.

Bayes made her Broadway debut, in “The Rogers Brothers in Washington,” in 1901. She scored a major stage and phonographic hit in 1908 with the song “Shine On, Harvest Moon,” a duet with her then-husband Jack Norworth. Bayes would enjoy a long list of hits including “Prohibition Blues” and “How Ya Gonna Keep ‘Em Down on the Farm?” Additionally, she would appear consistently on Broadway including appearances in the “Ziegfield Follies of 1908” and the “Ziegfield Follies of 1909.” For a time, beginning in 1918, she even owned her own headlining theater; the Nora Bayes was located on 44th Street in New York City. Married five times and the adoptive mother of three children, Bayes died of cancer in 1928. Her life story would later serve as the basis for the 1944 musical film “Shine On, Harvest Moon” where she would be played by Ann Sheridan.

Unlike such other patriotic perennials as “God Bless America” or “America the Beautiful,” Cohan’s “Over There” is directly a song about war. America’s general G.I. becomes “Johnnie” in the song and, in a direct call to action, is told to “get your gun” and “take it on the run.” “Over There” is certainly intended as a morale booster—some would even say propaganda--and,

possibly, a recruitment tool (i.e. “Hear them calling you...ev’ry son of liberty.”) The spirit of the song is upbeat and gung ho (“Hurry right away, no delay, go today”)--and at times recklessly optimistic. There is little attention to war’s unseemly realities, no mention of injury or casualties. It’s an attitude—emboldened and strengthened by music or not—which has endured, as sadly timeless as war itself.

“Over There’s” repetitive nature--“Get your gun” is repeated six times; “over there” is repeated 10 times--and simple rhyme schemes no doubt added to its popularity as well as its endurance. The repetition practically demands a sing-a-long, like a cheer at a high school pep rally or the fight song at a college football game. The song’s general vagueness, meanwhile, adds to its timelessness—“there” is never defined and hence can be discerned to be any war theater. The song also does much to call up various uniquely American themes: patriotism (“Hoist the flag and let her fly, Yankee Doodle do or die”); religion (“So prepare, say a prayer”); and perseverance (“And we won’t come back ‘til it’s over, over there”).

Though not necessarily typical of her, Bayes all-out delivery of the song also conveys the song’s call to arms nature. In her bombastic style, Bayes resembles two of her Registry sisters, namely Kate Smith (singer of another patriotic hit, “God Bless America”) and fellow belter Judy Garland. Legend has it that Cohan pursued Bayes specifically to record his latest work, no doubt because of her fame. But, beyond that, what is to be made of a woman singing this song of boys and battle? Is she the representative of the universal mother telling us all what to do? In her musical edict is she the personification of Lady Liberty, or an American *Marianne*, rallying the troops and leading the charge?

In whichever case, music and war have often gone hand in hand, consider “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” forever intertwined with the American war between the states and the tune “Dixie” coopted by the same. With the advent of radio and recording technologies, music would only gain in importance during times of war. Certainly World War II had its kit of songs, used for both moral and propaganda—note “Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition.” Often though, perhaps as WWII wore on, the hits began to take on a slightly melancholy feel, consider “I’ll Be Seeing You” and Peggy Lee’s “Waitin’ for the Train to Come In.” Songs still play a part in binding people together during times of national emergency, consider Lee Greenwood’s suddenly resurrected “Proud to Be an American” during the first Gulf War and just after 9-11.

It can be argued that Bayes’s “Over There” was one of the first of this type of purposeful, popular battle hymns. Certainly it seems to be the most well-known and enduring, still as likely as any to be invoked and revived in times of need, national unity or simply nostalgia.

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